Fazil' Iskander: cultural bilingualism and the writings in Russian of the non-Russian intelligentsia

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IN 1990 Tat'jana Tolstaja made the following claim about the opportunities available to a non-Russian author writing in the Soviet period:

> If a good writer is to emerge, he may or may not make it to Moscow. Certainly, there are some very good writers who don't make it to the surface. In this connection, everybody is equal.[1]

This simplistic scheme seems to have applied in the case of the Ab-khaz writer Fazil' Iskander. He has lived in Moscow since 1966 and his work has been continuously in print from that time onward, although it has proven especially popular with the publishing houses in the post-perestrojka period. Tolstaja's formulation does not, however, take account of one of the crucial elements of this process, which distinguished non-Russian writers from other members of the Moscow intelligentsia: the need to write in a language other than that of their home nation. Iskander, whose literary output is in Russian, provides an especially clear example of why scholars should attend more closely to this element in these authors' works. In particular, such attention will demand a less assimilating and more nuanced approach to the writings in Russian of the non-Russian intelligentsia.

In the criticism of the late Soviet and post-Soviet era, his implicitly voluntary choice of language and location has been used to treat Iskander as simply a Russian writer (Ivanova 1990; Ryan-Hayes 1995). Thus Ivanova, who has to this day published the only critical volume devoted solely to Iskander, sets his work all too readily within the context of the experience of the liberal intelligentsia in general. As the critic moves on to consider Iskander's constant use of the village as a literary setting, however, inherent contradictions begin to appear in her approach. Her favoured labels of neo-pop-ulism *(neopočvenničestvo)* and the closely associated Russian

[1] At the Lisbon Conference on Literature (see the transcript in 'Lisbon Conference...', 112).

village prose are problematic in this case, she is eventually forced to admit, since Iskander is not Russian. Ivanova herself seeks to resolve this contradiction by regarding Iskander simultaneously as a neo-populist and as a member of a truly cosmopolitan liberal intelligentsia (Ivanova 1990, 229).

Evidently, the hybrid identity Ivanova thus assigns to Iskander serves to defer the issue of the ambivalent cultural affiliations of Iskander, for which no individual category is found appropriate. If Iskander's non-Russianness comes to the fore in the neo-populist pole of Ivanovas characterisation, in other accounts it surfaces when Iskander is actively portrayed as the leading figure of the liberal literary intelligentsia. A conversation between Cudakova and Dombrovskij reveals that in the 1970s, when many liberal authors were forced to emigrate, Iskander and Ajtmatov were perceived to be literature's last hope (Rogov 1998). The fact that the two most highly rated authors were themselves of non-Russian origin but wrote in Russian is symptomatic, although their relationship towards mainstream Russian culture was apparently considered to be simple and transparent.

Iskander himself, during meetings with his readers, has sometimes described his own position as that of a Russian writer with an Abkhazian background, but he has also employed an adjective designating Russian statehood *(rossijskijpisatel')* in order to define his literary preoccupations. Like the seemingly contradictory labels applied by Ivanova these two self-definitions are problematic. Above all, the second self-definition complicates the apparently stable cultural affiliations suggested by the first. The present paper seeks to resolve the crucial question of what lies behind Iskander's own deployment of the notion of statehood here. By invoking as its context the conception of the Soviet Union as the heir of the Russian empire—a late empire, as historians have called it (Kappeler 2001,1)—and by reading the novella 'Prince Oldenburgsky' (Trine Ol'denburgskij') against the background of other writings by this author, it will propose that this work, more than any other, acts as a meta-commentary on the writer's own cultural affiliations. It is from the vantage point offered by a *cultural bilingualism,* it will be argued, that a discourse in which Russianness is conveyed as the Soviet cultural norm is subjected to parody.

My discussion so far has served to emphasise that the Soviet intelligentsia, too, was engaging in this kind of discourse. 'Prince Oldenburgsky' represented for Dombrovskij, for instance, a low

point in Iskander's otherwise excellent output. In it, he argued, 'Iskander has lowered himself to farce'.[2] This opinion could have reflected a broader concern among the intelligentsia that they, too, were actually being parodied in the eponymous protagonist of 'Prince Oldenburgsky'. The role of cultural bilingualism within the works of Iskander, however, does not serve simply to offer the author a parodie perspective upon the prevailing cultural norms of the time. In other of Iskander's writings, it can also engender both an unresolved psychological conflict and a state of Utopian harmony that comes close to sliding into the Soviet 'true internationalism'. The various forms cultural bilingualism may acquire, it will be argued, offer a more comprehensive approach to the writings in Russian of the non-Russian intelligentsia than those outlined in previous studies of this kind.

I. 'An island of the ideal monarchy'

The novella 'Prince Oldenburgsky', originally published on its own, has been incorporated into Iskander's polynovellistic novel *Sandro of Chegem* since its 1979-81 publication in the West. The original conception of the novel as a parody of the picaresque novel (Iskander 1983, vii) seems to fit the structure of this particular novella exceptionally well. Characteristically of a picaresque piece, the plot of 'Prince Oldenburgsky' revolves around two events that disrupt the usual daily routine of an aristocrat: the prince is deprived of the services of his intriguing masseuse, and a favourite black swan has disappeared from his bird collection. Repressions ensue until the novella s picaresque hero, the Abkhaz Sandro, manages to save his own life in a court adjudicated by the prince, whereupon balance is restored to the monarchy. The story closes with the reunion of the prince with his masseuse. The picaresque stylisation, however, conceals a subtext that must have prevented the text from breaking 'away to the wide-open spaces of pure humour', as Iskander himself has put it (ibid., vii).

This subtext is revealed above all in the characteristics given by Iskander to the figure of Oldenburgsky, who is based on a historical governor of the Abkhaz town of Gagra at the turn of the last century. In the novella's parodie historiography, Peter the Great provides the role model for Oldenburgsky as he endeavours to turn

[2] «Искандер скатился в фарс» (quoted from Rogov 1998, 103, wy *translation*, т. К.)

Gagra into 'a realm of order, justice, and a complete confluence of the monarch with the people, and even the peoples' (ibid., 39). The Gagra health resort, which according to his plan must become 'an oasis of the ideal monarchy' (ibid., 39), is to serve as an example both to the Russian tsar and to the rest of the country. The prince even aims to challenge the Socialists for the sympathy of the working class and is himself described throughout in the language of the official propaganda of the Stalinist epoch. The figure of Oldenburg-sky multiplies itself yet further, moreover, by referring parodically both to Leninism and to the temporary Chruščevian liberalisation. The historiography of the novella is thus not merely a historiography of a single rule, but it refers to a much more enduring phenomenon, which is designated directly in the text as the 'empire' (ibid 39)-

Oldenburgsky is revealed as an emphatic follower of the 'westernising' line of the Russian autocratic tradition and its founder. Like the legendary enlightener Peter the Great, he establishes a *Kunstkamera*, a curio house, but with a truly imperial purpose:

> to develop an inquisitive spirit among the aborigines... He was tireless in his hope that wise expediency would make Russian protection appealing to people of other nationalities, (ibid., 41-2)

If the Gagra resort is modelled by the prince on St Petersburg, his own gigantic appearance resembles Peter himself. The prince does not shun physical exertion and, during the massage he receives in the final scene, his back is described as 'huge' and his body as 'big' (ibid., 53). The fact that the material bodily needs of the monarch and not his reason are central to the text serves as a comical contrast to the idea of the rationally grounded monarchy. Because the prince is the solemn executor of their fates, Gagra's inhabitants are immediately affected by the workings of the masseuse.

This connection between the gigantic body of the monarch and the fate of his mini-empire can be read as a parody of certain images already in existence in Russian literature. In the genre of the ode, which, as Ram (1998 *a)* has pointed out, was one of the first in literature to hail the conquest of the Caucasus, the image of Catherine the Great appeared sitting on a gigantic throne over all the peoples of the empire. In Deržavin's 'The depiction of Felitsa', the empress, who worked hard to fashion and uphold her image as the heir of Peter the Great, is represented as a bearer of the Enlightenment to her savage Eastern peoples. Ram also reminds us that, in her

Instruction, Catherine grounded the ratio of the Russian autocracy in the geographical vastness of the empire, which, without the direct attention of the monarch, would otherwise engulf the Russian statehood. The monarch thus became a rhetorical guarantor of the maintenance of law in the empire, which was thereby composed into a single nation by the physical outstretch of his or her body:

> In the discourse of Enlightenment and its characteristic Russian mutations, despotism functions as this imaginary geography, folding East into West and empire into nation. Yet these conflations are not effortless, and their residues mark the figure of the absolutist monarch. It is the equation of territorial expanse with the figurai body of the despot... that marks the attempted transition from imperial to national space. In the voice and the body of the despot we find inscribed what Benedict Anderson has called the inner incompatibility of nation and empire. (Ram 1998a, 41)

Words such as 'nation' and 'empire', 'people' and 'peoples', all Embodied by the monarch, are also interchangeable in the novella:

> Yes, only by personal example can one inspire a nation, as Peter the Great, himself a tireless toiler on the throne, taught us and continues to teach us. (Iskander 1983, 40)

Rearing in mind the connection, noted by Sinjavskij (2002, 126), between the odes on the one hand and the aspects of the socialist ealist discourse which were directed towards the praise of the ruler on the other, a generic ancestry can be discerned here. The token phrase, parodied in the quote, could serve as a representation of both Stalin and Lenin. Oldenburgsky's parodie speech defect, evident in the orthography of the original Russian version but not in the English translation, evokes Lenin in particular. ('Здхаствуйте, £хатцы', he addresses his workers (Iskander 1991,1,57).) Not only does this defect constitute another textual sign of the physical Imperfection of the ruler, but it also comically undermines the efficiency of his language. A psychoanalytic model put forward by Žižek (1991) and applied in her analysis of socialist realism by Julia Hell (1997) suggests that the latter is a necessary effect of the former. According to psychoanalytical theory, language proficiency in children becomes possible only when the parental bodies are sub-limated and disconnected from all physical urges. Similarly, only a dematerialisation and super-human elevation of the body of the ruler is able to direct the energy of the libido into a mastering of the imperial signs.

2. Eurasianism and bilingualism

By making the material body of the prince so explicitly the main driving force of its plot, the novella places the ruler on the same level as one of his watchmen, who is almost killed by Sandro when he emits an obscene bodily noise while the latter is drinking water. This comic episode sets the scene for Sandro's subsequent meeting with the prince himself, who, as the sole dispenser of justice in the mini-monarchy, sits in judgement on this case too.

> How did it happen? the prince asked, hunching forward and examining Uncle Sandro from under his brows. This habit lent his posture a threatening impetuosity and impressed his fellow conversationalist with the necessity of getting to the truth by the shortest possible path.
>
> Uncle Sandro understood this immediately. Sensing that the shortest pass to the truth would be the one most perilous for him, he decided not to give in, but to force his own path to the truth on the prince. He had already embarked on this path at the police station, where he had pretended not to understand Russian. (Iskander 1983,46)

The development of the plot is thus conditioned by the bilingualism of Sandro and this also adds a new parodie subtext to the novella. Notably, the imperial subject professes to speak both the language of the 'aborigines' and that of the 'protectors', while neither the body nor the language of the ruler succeeds in converting the empire into a symbolic whole. Bilingualism allows the Abk-haz protagonist covertly to confront the prince, while the pauses required for the interpreter to translate his testimony give Sandro the time necessary for manoeuvring in the face of 'the shortest path'.

The picaresque hero is also able to resolve one of the two disturbances in the routine of the prince. It is revealed that Sandro had caught for the curio house the black swan, without knowing about its disappearance from the collection. The picaresque hero—just like the other Abkhazians who bring artefacts for the collection that, in their view, the prince assembles out of boredom—is similarly driven in the first place by a desire to receive a material reward for the swan. Saying all the right things, Sandro tells a colourful story about the catching of what he now calls the 'present'. To postpone a death sentence by inserting a narrative within a narrative is, according to Sklovskij (1929), a typical polynovellistic device. Here

it replicates the macro-narrative of *Sandro of Chegem*. The device explicitly conjoins the ability of the protagonist to survive with his Ability in language—in particular, in his skill as a narrator. Since this Strategy is successful, it provides the turning point of the plot. San-dro's apparent generosity affects Oldenburgsky, who comes to per-ceive him through the prism of a well-known stereotype in imperial discourse—that of the Noble Savage: 'A savage, Alexander Petrov-ich thought, but what a sense of dignity.' (Iskander 1983, ji)

Under the guise of the Noble Savage, the risk Sandro runs by not accepting the conditions imposed by Oldenburgsky is neutralised. The Savage remains the coloniser's inferior in his alleged indifference to the law, but since the Romantics' literary discovery of the Caucasus, his unsubmissiveness has been utilised to offer a positive con-trast to the realities of Russia itself, as Ram has pointed out:

> Not so much an ethnic stereotype as a symbol or symptom of European anxieties, the Noble Savage was in essence just another version of the Romantic hero, an allegorical screen on which the Russian author could project—and displace—his own political alienation. The mountain dwellers' stubborn love of freedom, the subject of the profound admiration of several generations of Russian writers, served as an contrastive lens which enabled them to observe the enslavement of the Russian people by the Russian political system.[3]

Regarding itself not as a continuation, but as an overcoming of the feudal past, Oldenburgsky's 'liberal' and 'ideal' monarchy makes a similar displacement:

> 'They haven't known slavery, that's one good thing about the Abkhazians', the prince said significantly, addressing the retinue. The retinue sighed, and the several faces seemed to express a certain belated guilt for the prolonged slavery of serfdom in their native land. (Iskander 1983, 52)

This displacement allows for the coloniser's civilising mission to remain in power, even though it is in the first place applied to the Russian people themselves. The initial contrast between Russia and

[3] «Не столкько этнический стереотип, сколько символ или симптом европейских тревог, Благородный Дикарь был в сущности еще одной версией романтического героя, аллегорическим экраном, на который русский писатель мог проецировать — и переностить — собственное политическое отчуждение. Упорная приверженность горцев свободе, предмет искреннего восхищения нескольких поколений русских писателей, служила контрастной призмой, сквозь которую можно было наблюдать порабощенность русского народа русской политической системой.» (Ram *1998b,* 83, *my translation,* т. к.)

the East—the Abkhaz—is automatically translated into the language of the ever-unresolved relationship between Russia and the West. Internal feudalism and autocracy have historically constituted the major topics of comparison between Russia and the West, but both Western and Russian colonial authority, by contrast, has usually been taken for granted.

Unlike Britain and France, as has repeatedly been pointed out, Russia experienced considerable difficulties in delimiting herself ~ the territory populated by the Russians—against her colonies. The formation of a nation, with its democratic freedoms granted to equal citizens, was therefore highly complicated: hence the paradoxical attempts to resolve the problem by means of inversion, both on behalf of the autocracy and the cultural elite. Russia's liminal geographic identity came to be perceived as a cultural kinship, which gave Russia a birthright to its Eastern possessions. Symbolic 'Eurasianism' was thus employed by the empire long before the invention of the term itself. Therefore, in her 'Tale of Prince Chlor', Catherine the Great depicts herself as the *Eastern* princess Felitsa,[4] to whom Deržavin would later dedicate his ode (Ram 1998л, 41-9). In much the same way, and as explicated by Layton, the Russian Romantics found the mirror of the Caucasian Noble Savage worthy of reflecting their own aspirations, without ever quite abandoning their civilizing mission:

> only in semi-Asian Russia did the romantic constitution of the East provide therapy for a profoundly ambivalent consciousness of national difference from Europe. (Layton 1994, 75)

The novella 'Prince Oldenburgsky' casts this inversion in a completely new light. In the rhetorical conflict between West and East it is not the 'liminal', 'Eurasian' Russia, but only the bilingual Sandro who professes to speak both languages. The life and survival of the protagonist serves as the measure of his proficiency in the language and in the stereotypes of the empire, but the connection between language and the repressive imperial body appears not to converge entirely with the psychoanalytic model put forward by Zižek (1991). It is not only the vulnerability of the material body of the despot, but also the fact that the protagonist—like Iskander himself—speaks his native Abkhazian as well as the language of the empire, which here undermines the entrance of the text into the

[4] Notably, with a Latinate name.

established symbolic order. Bilingualism therefore provides the necessary vantage point and point of departure for all the parodie strategies in the text—both the multilayered parodie historiography and the parody of the prince's corporeality—since they all target first and foremost Russia's self-image as a multiethnic empire. This bilingualism also provides the text with a perspective from which certain superficial imperial transgressions can be ironised—as in the stereotype of the Noble Savage.

The covert bilingualism of Sandro may be perceived as a meta-commentary on the novella itself. Even though it is written in Russian, the novella's use of parody and irony may also be aimed at the imperial reader. However, as it comes to the fore in the text, this bilingualism can rather be termed 'cultural' than 'linguistic', since the author acts here both as translator and interpreter.

3. Conflictual and non-conflictual paradigms of cultural bilingualism

The thesis of this paper so far has been that cultural bilingualism in 'Prince Oldenburgsky', along with the parody of the material body, works towards an undermining of the imagined community the empire is aspiring to become. Even though this text is a part of Iskander's major novel, the conclusions about his overall literary production should not be drawn too hastily. It will be argued in the following that a non-conflictual pattern of cultural bilingualism, along with a bilingualism that provokes an internal rather than an external conflict, can also be found in his writings. It should further be noted that the protagonist's external conflict with imperial authority, enabled by bilingualism, is only temporary in 'Prince Oldenburgsky'. In the end, this conflict actually also enables Sandro inadvertently to fulfil the role of a picaresque hero and act as a donor. In other words, he is able to restore balance to the monarchy. Sandro manages to win his life back, but the prince must remain blind to his irony and continue to regard the Noble Savage as a flattering mirror of his own generosity. In the same way, the censor of the first publication of the text must have remained blind to its subversive potential, probably considering it to be a politically correct critique of imperialism prior to the revolution.

Apart from *Sandro ofChegem* and his breakthrough first novel, *Goatibex Constellation (Sozvezdie kozlotura, 1966),* Iskander's literary output has consisted mainly of a series of short stories which

have children and adolescents as their protagonists. Ivanova (1990, 138) explains their appearance by claiming that Iskander was unable to develop the satirical skills revealed in *Goatibex Constellation* in the prevailing political climate. A boy named Cik is the protagonist in the major part of Iskander's short stories about children. The boy is not only bilingual. In addition to Abkhaz and Russian he has also some proficiency in other languages of the Black Sea coast. However the parodie edge, of the kind made possible and displayed in the bilingualism of 'Prince Oldenburgsky', is absent from these texts. Čik is sincerely enthused by the teaching of Puškin at his Russian school, and the imperial ironies of the Romanticist discourse informed by the image of a Caucasian Noble Savage seem to be wasted on him ('Cik and Puškin').

Being and speaking Abkhaz, Cik is able to earn the trust of an accidental acquaintance who explains to him that the subversives *(vrediteli)* of their high Stalinist times might simply not exist ('Čik Goes Hunting'). Curiosity takes Cik to the brink of what it is possible to do in the society in which he is growing up, but he overcomes all obstacles successfully. His multilingualism adds to his ability either to do or to learn the right thing according to the standards of common decency. On the basis of this ability, Rassadin in a foreword (in Iskander 1999) has characterised Cik as the Utopian hero of an idealised childhood. It might be added that, despite its anti-Stalinist, liberal vein, the Čik series conveys to its reader a **Uto-**pian, non-conflictual sense of cultural hybridity much in accordance with the proclaimed 'true internationalism' of the epoch.

While publishing his short stories about children, Iskander was nevertheless also working on his *Sandro of Chegem.* Only a shortened version of *Sandro* appeared in print in 1973, and the compromise he had to make with the censors did not come easily to the author. These circumstances probably provide a biographic explanation for the fact that he published his only story describing the death of a child protagonist, *Remzik*, shortly after (1974). If this is so, it is the theme of cultural bilingualism that is chosen as the expressive means to convey this sense of crisis to the reader. In this text, the crisis of bilingualism is played out in the spatial opposition between the town and the village. The 'Abkhaz' town Mukhus is also the fictional space where Cik resides, and it, too, is culturally hybrid. As a boy, the eponymous child protagonist of *Remzik* has to stay behind in the town with his uncle's Russian wife during the Second World War, while his mother and siblings are placed in his

grandfather's village. The protagonist is thus invited to extend the safe cultural space of the Abkhaz village to incorporate the partly Russianised space of the town.

Unlike the Cik series, this attempt at harmonisation does not succeed. In the opening sequence of the text the protagonist becomes aware of his aunt's infidelity. The contradictory moral obligations (should he upset his uncle who is at the frontline?) challenge the boy's masculinity and force him into silence. The only Solution he is finally able to come up with is to displace himself, to leave the town for the village. The boy is welcomed by his grand-mother, who performs a ritual protective gesture around his head: 'Let what is destined to happen to you happen to me.'[5] This sign of cultural difference does not, however, fulfil its promise of salvation, as the boy is still tormented by his unspeakable knowledge. Cultural hybridity in this text thus takes on the form of a deep psychological conflict, as the boy is silenced despite his cultural bilingual-ism. He acts briefly to regain control, but the text ebbs out into silence when he gallops off towards his death on a horse he knows to be wild.

The different positions acquired by the subject as a result of cultural bilingualism in the writings of Iskander—a Utopian harmony, internal and external conflict—find a less nuanced parallel in what Barker (1993) has called a 'divided self in the writings of another non-Russian author writing in Russian, the Chukchi Rytchëu (though seldom ironic and more obviously a practitioner of social-ost realism). Iskander is certainly not a unique example of a non-Russian member of the intelligentsia writing in Russian. The span of cultural bilingualism in his work seems to reflect the conditions of this intelligentsia's emergence in the Soviet Union as a late empire, oscillating between assimilation and internationalism, and between the precedence of the dominant Russian culture and some degree of recognition of national particularity. As for being compelled to write in a non-native language, the situation of this intelligentsia bears comparison with the situation of the colonised native elites of the British or French empires. At the same time, a non-Russian intellectual working in Russian appears to be a more typical representative of his or her compatriots. If the final reach of the Russian language in the Soviet Union was not absolute, it was

[5] «Что с тобой должно случиться, пусть случится со мной.» (Iskander 1986. , 53. *my translation,* т. *к.)*

nonetheless much greater than the reach of literacy in English in India, for instance, which approximated only to a small percentage of the population. Since the colonies of the Russian empire, most of which the Soviet Union inherited, have not been overseas (unlike their French and British counterparts), its neighbouring localities have allowed for a greater degree of interpénétration and assimilation. The pressure to assimilate during the Soviet rule was enhanced by an educational system that became increasingly well developed over time. A schoolboy—and a literary character by Iskander—Čik is both a product of and model for this process.

Still, despite this continuous pressure to assimilate, the Soviet Union consisted of explicitly demarcated national units. In order to be 'true', its proclaimed internationalism had to a certain degree to acknowledge the existence of these individual nations. As a consequence, the writings in Russian of the non-Russian intelligentsia were paradoxically obliged to convey national particularity— 'national form', to quote the well-known postulate of socialist realism—while writing in Russian. Some highly formalised level of cultural bilingualism was thus permitted even by the most restrictive discourse of the period. Accordingly, unlike the colonial literature of the nineteenth century, which was compelled to celebrate only the culture of the coloniser, some perfect bilingual hybrid is produced in the Čik series. This ambiguity between a simultaneous assimilation and a formal acknowledgement of national particularity marks another difference between the Soviet Union and the nineteenth-century British or French empires. In accordance with the historical analysis of, for example, Kappeler (2001) this can be taken as an indication of the Soviet Union being a late, weakened empire. Having been on the verge of disintegration after the succession of revolutions, the empire was reconstructed by the Bolsheviks on the pretence that they were pursuing the 'true internationalism' of the world revolution. In order to keep this empire, however, they subsequently had to accept a formal recognition of national particularity in return. This position finds support in the latest writings by Iskander himself:

> It is a historic irony that the Bolsheviks, who had demolished the decrepit empire, were the only force able to reconstruct it. In order to survive the empire needed a new label by which to justify the new energy of its unificatory yoke.[6]

[6] «По иронии истории большевики, сокрушившие одряхлевшую империю были единственной силой, способной ее воссоздать. Империя для своего сохранения нуждалась в новой вывеске, чтобы оправдать новую энергию соединяющего гнета.» (Iskander 2000, 248, my translation, т. к.)

It is in the context of a somewhat weakened empire that such different texts as 'Prince Oldenburgsky', *Remzik* and the Čik series could be produced by a single author. To suggest that the span of cultural bilingualism outlined here is able to provide a less assimilating and more nuanced approach to what should in consequence be treated as a separate area in post-Soviet studies — the writings in Russian of the non-Russian intelligentsia—has been the purpose of the present paper.

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